



# FACULTY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

May 2009

Volume 3, Issue 2

## *Survivor Syndrome: How to Cope When Colleagues Leave and the Workload Stays*

Figuring out how to increase productivity can add to the load, at least temporarily. So figuring out what *won't* be done is often the only practical choice.

*Ann Latham, President  
Uncommon Clarity, Inc.*



Whew. You still have a job, but some of your colleagues weren't so lucky. How do you get past the sense of loss when colleagues leave? What do you need to do right now, to cope with all the extra work left behind?

"Give yourself a break and keep your thoughts in check," says Elizabeth R. Lombardo, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, physical therapist and author. "Try to stay away from cognitive distortions— inaccurate and unhelpful patterns of thinking."

Recognize, then avoid some of these common thought traps, Lombardo suggests:

**Personalizing:** "It is my fault she got cut."

**Blaming:** "It is the chair's fault he got fired."

**Over generalizing:** "The people making decisions don't care about any of us."

**Regret orientation:** "I should have helped him out with that research paper he was writing."

**Catastrophizing:** "It is terrible that she got fired."



She will never get another job in this economy. And now I am going to have to take up all of her work. I will never be able to handle all that."

When you realize that these thoughts won't help the situation, you can move forward.

### **Getting Beyond the Loss**

Medical professionals, by nature of their jobs, learn to tune out a lot of their own emotional signals, says

workplace psychologist Karissa Thacker, Psy.D. "It is likely that the feelings of loss will show up in less obvious ways. Identify what feelings of loss look like on you. Do you get angry or cynical? What happens? Do you work more? Feel less motivated? Do those feelings make you tired

and short with others? Identifying and naming your particular way of expressing feelings of loss at work will help you move through it. You may also find ironic humor in the way you and your colleagues express loss."

### **Digging Out**

When the workload of others suddenly falls on you, it can seem overwhelming. "Take 30 minutes and look

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## Survivor Syndrome: Coping Tips

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at everything that has to be done right now,” advises Thacker. “What are you doing that someone else could do? Roles have to be crystal clear when you are working with fewer people. Medical professionals are notorious for taking on work that someone else could be doing, because it can seem easier to do it themselves than to stop and explain the task to someone else.”

If you need to push back on managerial expectation, push back with respect, says Thacker. “Enlist administrators and present the overload as a problem to be solved that affects everyone.”

Ann Latham, president of Massachusetts consulting firm Uncommon Clarity, Inc., says there are only two possibilities to consider when the workload goes up. “You can figure out how to accomplish more, or you can figure out what won’t be done,” she says.

“Figuring out how to

increase productivity usually adds to the load, at least temporarily, so figuring out what *won’t* be done is often the only practical choice,” Latham continues. “Work together to determine where you can abandon, postpone, outsource, or cut corners. If you don’t make a reasoned decision, you are likely to see the wrong things abandoned, postponed, or done poorly.”

“Set limits and share them with others, so expectations are consistent,” adds Lombardo.

### Are You Coping? Or not?

There are a number of signs that you may not be coping as well as you think you are. Among those signs, says Thacker, are rapid weight gain or loss, family members complaining about your behavior when you are home, less interest in the parts of your work that you used to like, and difficulty sleeping.

Lombardo offers a further list of signs that can accompany heightened stress:

**Physical:** headaches, GI disturbance, heart palpitations, tight muscles

**Behavioral:** being short-tempered, insomnia (or hypersomnia), overeating

**Emotional:** depressed mood, helplessness, hopelessness, anxiety, panic

**Cognitive:** difficulty concentrating (in addition to the use of cognitive distortions mentioned earlier)

“Usually it is the first two sets of symptoms that people notice initially,” says Lombardo. “Often it is loved ones and the people around you who are more aware of these signs and symptoms than you are.”

Talking with a trusted friend is one way of coping. For gaining additional perspective or access to extra resources, the Faculty Assistance Program has skilled professionals who understand what you’re going through.

### Resources

[www.ControlStressForGood.com](http://www.ControlStressForGood.com)  
[www.UncommonClarity.com](http://www.UncommonClarity.com)  
[www.KarissaThacker.com](http://www.KarissaThacker.com)

You may feel guilty that some colleagues are gone while you still have a job. That’s normal. It’s also normal to be glad that some people are gone. Stay in contact with colleagues you miss and whose company you truly enjoy.



### Your Faculty Assistance Program: A Caring, Confidential Resource

We care about your wellbeing on and off the job. Your Faculty Assistance Program (FAP), administered by the professionals at Wood & Associates, is a confidential resource you can rely on, 24/7, when you need an assist during times of change, stress or crisis. This service is a faculty benefit. We’re also a resource for helping you grow personally and professionally.

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## Counteracting Burnout: Healthy Ways to Re-Energize

Carving out time for yourself, your family and friends is an essential part of self-care during times of stress. Even a few minutes of down time can help to ward off burnout. A brisk walk with a friend at lunchtime, sharing a hobby with your family, or pausing to watch a gulf sunset can help you recharge.

“Losing people drains an or-

ganization of resources, and it also creates an energy drain,” says author and psychotherapist Katherine Crowley. “You need time to mourn but also time to gather energy and strength. Re-energize, re-connect and re-build with exercise, outdoor activities, solid sleep, social connections and healthy forms of relaxation.” Minimize the use of mood-altering substances

including caffeine, alcohol, sugar, fat and drugs. These can create energy spikes that exacerbate the situation.”

### Resources

“Working With You is Killing Me: Freeing Yourself From Emotional Traps at Work,” by Katherine Crowley and Kathi Elster (Warner Books, 2006)